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ABSTRACT

The authors question Burgoon's assumption that the acquisition of grades and the achievement of course goals are highly positively correlated. The major criticisms of Burgoon's study concern use of grades as measurements of success and the nature of the experimental population. The use of grades is criticized on the grounds that disparity existed in the determination criteria. The generalizability of results is also limited due to the selective experimental population--students and instructors participating in public speaking and freshman communication courses at General Motors Institute. The unique character of this information suggests that the results might differ from those obtained in a more typical institution of higher learning. (Author/LG)

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A Critique of Burgoon's Study of Willingness to Manipulate Others and Success in Two Basic Speech Communication Courses

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In the September, 1971 Speech Teacher, Burgoon reported his attempt to determine the relationship between willingness to manipulate others with success in two different types of speech communication courses. He correlated scores on a questionnaire developed by Christie and Geis (1970) designed to measure Machiavellianism (Mach) with final grades received in either a basic communication course or a basic course in public speaking. Multiple regression analysis yielded a correlation of +.40 between grades and Mach scores for the communication class (N=217) which was significantly greater than chance expectations. In the public speaking class (N=134) the product moment correlation between grades and Mach scores was +.09 which was not significantly different from chance. Using a t-test Burgoon determined that the correlation between Mach scores and final grades was significantly greater in the communication class than in the public speaking class. He concluded that "lack of structure in the communication course allowed the high Mach persons to persuade more, manipulate others to his desired ends, and receive a higher grade in the course than low Machs" and that Machiavellianism was a "partial indicator of success in such a course." (Burgoon, 1971, p. 183)

We have chosen to critique this study for two reasons: first, there are some problems that we see with the methodology which lead us to question the validity of Burgoon's conclusions; and secondly, we believe that the article raises some important issues that should be of concern for scholars and educators of speech communication and which should be discussed.

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Methodological Considerations

Our first methodological concern is the measurement of the variables that were correlated. We have no quarrel with Burgoon's choice of the Mach IV scale developed by Christie and Geis. The form used is a twenty item instrument with a split-half reliability of .79. Items are in a Likert type format so that subjects use numbers from 1 through 7 to reflect their degree of agreement or disagreement with items. Only six categories are used, however, with the score of 4 being reserved for "no response." Burgoon satisfactorily summarized validity date from Christie and Geis and we agree with his conclusion that the scale has "adequate internal consistency, demonstrated validity, and appears to tap peoples' willingness to manipulate others." (Burgoon, p. 181)

We do not agree, however, with Burgoon's choice of grades as a measure of success. In the first place, we do not agree with his philosophical stance on grades. Burgoon claims to agree with Wall (1970) who he paraphrased, stating that he believes a course grade is "an inherently unreliable measure of success." (Burgoon, p. 182) Since a relatively high degree of reliability is necessary for a measure to be valid, it does not seem reasonable to use an "inherently unreliable" measure in a study in which one is attempting to be scientific. Commenting further on grades, Burgoon says "few speech communication teachers would be willing to claim that objectively scored examinations are better measures of success in the basic course" and that though teacher judgments may be unreliable, they constitute the best available indicator of a student's success in the course. (Burgoon, p. 182)

We are aware that in cases where grade determination is the prerogative of individual instructors there may be wide differences in the reliability of grades assigned by those different instructors. However, we cannot agree that

grades are inherently unreliable as Burgoon suggests, but rather their reliability is influenced by the ways in which they are determined. Suggestions such as those by Stalnaker (1951) for increasing the reliability of essay test questions might be employed for increasing the reliability of other ratings made by teachers which are used in grade determination.

Furthermore, we believe Burgoon limited himself unnecessarily by focusing on two alternative methods of arriving at course grades, teacher judgments and objectively scored tests. In doing this he overlooked a more basic question which must first be answered by anyone wishing to know if some variable is related to success in the basic courses. What Burgoon assumed and what we are not ready to assume is that acquisiton of grades and achievement of stated course goals are highly and positively correlated. Unless the teacher states his goals for the course and then systematically measures student achievement of those goals there is the possibility that achievement of the stated goals of the course may not correspond very highly with grades in the course. For this reason we believe that in studies of this sort, the correspondence between achievement of stated course goals and course grades should be assured rather than presumed and that unless this is done, it might be wise to correlate more direct measures of achievement of course goals with the personality characteristic of interest. These more direct measures of course goal achievement could then be used in the study without reference to course grade. Unless this is done there exists the possibility that we will become very informed about the relationship of many variables to "grade-getting" and not know very much at all about how these variables relate to more substantive kinds of success in our courses.

Besides disagreeing with Burgoon's philosophical stance on grades, the ways the grades were determined in the classes used in this specific study

being examined cause us to question the validity of the findings. The grades were not determined in the same way in the different sections of the two courses studied.

In the communication course the grades were determined by combining the following components:

> (1) instructor's evaluation of individual performance in a variety of in-class communication tasks, (2) peer evaluations of student performance in dyadic and group communication tasks, and (3) instructor's evaluation of relatively unstructured individual assignments such as the oral presentation of text material in a 'creative and interesting way.' (Burgoon, p. 180)

Of the five instructors teaching this course, three claimed examinations counted little (150 students), the fourth did not use peer evaluations in computing the final grade (45 students) and the fifth used test scores as the "minimum grade but raised final grades of students who performed well in class activities (22 students)." (Burgoon, p. 180)

The five instructors who taught the communication course, plus two others, were the instructors for the public speaking course.[1] In the public speaking course the grades were determined by "teacher's evaluation of a minimum of eight formal speeches and written examinations." (Burgoon, p. 180) Standard criteria for evaluating the formal speeches were distributed to the instructors by the course director. These criteria were those developed by Oliver (1960). Burgoon does not report if there was any attempt to ascertain if the instructors attempted to use these criteria that were made available to them.

In summary we find three weaknesses in the article related to the use of course grades as measures of achievement: (1) there was a godd degree of disparity in the ways in which grades were determined in the communication class sections; (2) there was no report of any attempt to determine the degree

of similarity of criteria actually employed by the instructors in the public speaking classes in rating performances; and (3) the proportion of the grade that was based on performance and the proportion of the grade based on tests and written assignments was not held constant in either course.

Another important methodological consideration is the sample of both students and instructors employed in the study. The subjects in the experiment were described as students "from the freshman communication course and from the basic public speaking course at General Motors Institute." (Burgoon, p. 180) All were engineering majors. Since GMI is a relatively unique institution of higher learning in that it is a part of the General Motors Corporation, it would be particularly helpful for interpretation and generalization of the results if more information about the subjects had been reported. For instance, neither the percentage of males and females nor the age of the subjects was reported. Such information is vital if there is to be any generalization from the data obtained on students in these courses to students enrolled in more typical institutions of higher learning.

Since instructor judgments figured so prominently into the determination of grades in this study, we are also concerned about the possible role that instructor personality characteristics might have played in these subjective aspects of grade determination. It seems entirely possible that the kinds of instructors who choose to work for General Motors Corporation might differ in some systematic ways from those who choose to teach in more typical institutions of higher learning. If they do differ, this would be another factor which would limit generalizations that could be made about the relationship of the variables under investigation.

Other Issues Raised By The Study

Burgoon states that "If we believe that those who succeed in the basic course are more likely to become speech communication majors, the change in

structure of many basic courses may be rewarding people with specific personality characteristics and, in turn, attracting a new type of speech communication major." (Burgoon, p. 183) In other words, if Machivellianism is positively correlated with success in courses which focus on interpersonal communication and speech communication departments offer more introductory courses of this type, there may be a tendency for greater numbers of high Machs to be attracted to the study of communication and to eventually enter employment as communication professionals. To explore the significance of this we believe that consideration of the characteristics of the Machiavellian personality is necessary.

Guterman (1970) defined Machiavellianism as an "amoral, manipulative attitude toward other individuals, combined with a cynical view of men's motives and of their character." Wrightsman (1964) also noted that Machiavellians possess a negative view of human nature, human nature consisting of the factors of trustworthiness, altruism, independence, strength of will, complexity, and variability. Similarly, Christie and Geis (1970) claim that a major characteristic of the Machiavellian is his willingness to manipulate other people, that is, getting others to do things they would not otherwise do. Christie and Geis have also noted other characteristics of the high Mach personality which are relevant to communication behavior. They claim that high Machs: (1) are more concerned with the "how" rather than the "why" of a situation when dealing with overt behavior; (2) appear to size up situations and then test the limits of how much they can get away with, but not to the point of becoming obvious to other persons in a position to retaliate; (3) approach situations from a cognitive-probabilistic rather than from an ethical or personal orientation; (4) are "opportunistic"; (5) treat others as objects rather than as persons;

(6) are more task-oriented rather than being concerned with maintenance processes; and (7) are more suspicious of others than are low Machs. (Christie and Geis, 1970)

In addition, Christie and Geis found that Machiavellianism demonstrated no significant relation with intelligence, political preference or ideology, psychopathology, or with most demographic variables. However, a slight negative relationship was found with social desirability, and a slight positive relationship with hostility.

Given this description of the Machiavellian personality our general reaction to Burgoon's study is surprise at both his major hypothesis and at his results. In the first place while the typical course in interpersonal communication does provide the kind of unstructured situation in which the high Machs are said to manipulate most effectively, Burgoon's hypothesis presumes that the manipulations of the high Mach will be rewarded by the instructor. We seriously doubt that any course in interpersonal communication anywhere has as its goal the rewarding of persons who are "opportunistic," who regard others as objects rather than persons, who are suspicious, cynical, and who have a negative view of human nature. Yet Burgoon found a significant positive correlation between possession of this type of personality and grade achievement in the introductory communication course. It is for this reason that we earlier expressed an interest in the degree of relationship between achievement of stated course goals and grades assigned in courses.

This brings us to our last comment on Burgoon's report. Given the nature of the Machiavellian personality and the goals of most introductory courses in interpersonal communication we are surprised that Burgoon has no comment to make on the relationship he has found between Machiavellianism and grades in these courses. It appears to us that Burgoon has carried out an attempt at

"value free" science (Maslow, 1966) to an extreme degree. Even though the predominant norm adhered to by both researchers and editors in the social sciences is that of attempting value-free science, we believe that it would be beneficial if researchers would comment as they personally see fit when discussing the results of their research. Had Burgoon done this we would not be left with our current view that he seems to have no personal feelings at all regarding the relationships found between Machiavellianism and grades in the two introductory speech communication courses which he studied.[1]

FOOTNOTES

Mr. Rossiter is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee. Mr. Macklin and Mr. Luecke are graduate students in Communication at the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee.

[1]It is a strength of the study that five instructors taught sections of both courses investigated.

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